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## Players ▶

### Mike LeDonne *Smokin' in NYC*

As any veteran musician knows, you have to learn how to play the house.

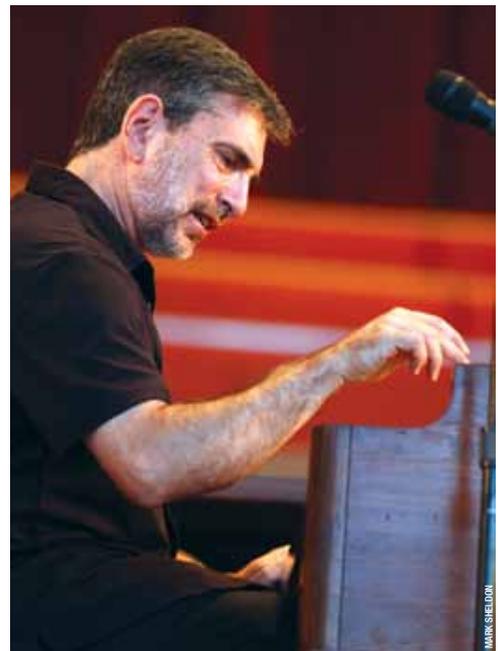
"We had a lot of empty tables with candles on them," says keyboard vet Mike LeDonne, commenting on his early career gigs. "I was just hitting and missing, trying to figure out what my direction was gonna be. But that club really solidified my direction playing live and making it on this record."

The club in question is the historic Smoke Jazz Club in Manhattan; the record is LeDonne's latest, the veritabably smokin' *Keep The Faith* (his sixth for Savant). It features his "Groover Quartet" with tenorist Eric Alexander, guitarist Peter Bernstein and drummer Joe Farnsworth. "Now, I know that if it works at Smoke," LeDonne adds, "it's gonna work with the general public. That's the beauty of having a gig like that. Some of the things I bring in, I only play it once, and you never hear it again. But some of them, first time, you can tell right away, that it's a keeper. So, when I make these records, they're all keepers."

Although LeDonne started recording in 1988, he wasn't playing organ in the studio back then. "On organ as a leader, this is only my fourth organ/leader date," he notes.

Which brings us to LeDonne's backstory. We sit at his dining room table, with an expansive view from his Midtown high-rise living-room window, a view that winds upward toward Harlem, and beyond. LeDonne is the quintessence of a man on the musical make, ready to take on all comers, a hustler in the best sense of the word. A graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, he grew up in a musical household—his father was a guitarist (with whom LeDonne played gigs starting at age 10) and owner of a music store. After moving to New York City, the Bridgeport, Conn., native started as a pianist playing with, among others, Benny Goodman, Sonny Rollins, Art Farmer, Dizzy Gillespie, Panama Francis and the Widespread Depression Jazz Orchestra. An eventual gig with Milt Jackson proved particularly formative, and he developed a long relationship with Benny Golson, which is ongoing.

LeDonne was working strictly as a pianist in 1990, when saxophonist Jim Snidero got him to sit in on organ with Brother Jack McDuff at a place called Dude's Bar in Harlem. From there, it was just a matter of time before LeDonne formed his own band around his Hammond B3 organ. The real beginning took place at Smoke



on the occasion of a tribute concert to organist Charles Earland, not long after his death in late 1999. LeDonne played one tune, and the reaction was so positive that he landed a series of Tuesday night gigs and put his band together. He's been there since 2000. The regular nature of the gig solidified the group, which has since toured worldwide.

"*Keep The Faith* was kind of a 'part-two' for me, because *The Groover* came out in 2010, and that was the same format," LeDonne explains. "It's what I do at Smoke, basically. I try to include tunes that are from the pop repertoire, but I don't know if I'd call them covers because I work hard on not making them covers. I work hard at making them vehicles for jazz, and they swing. And that's not easy. It means not losing the personality of the tune. I work on that because when I work at Smoke, I know it's not all jazz aficionados who come in there. It's a lot of young kids from Columbia [University] and places like that. They're not gonna be listening to me play 'All The Things You Are'; but if you play 'The Way You Make Me Feel' by Michael Jackson, they suddenly say, 'I know this.' And then you're swinging and they're listening to the solos and next thing you know, they're coming back every week. That's how we've lasted there all these years."

Indeed, playing the house means working the house. "When I made *The Groover*," LeDonne says, "I thought, 'What kind of organ record would I want to buy and listen to?' I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel. But I do want to put my stamp down. And it's all over these records."

—John Ephland